

Fleeing Chinese Tell of Food Shortages and Hard Life in the New Vietnam

By Jay Mathews

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HONG KONG—Many of the 1 million Chinese residents of southern Vietnam, faced with dwindling food rations and income, have packed their bags in hopes of being evacuated by ships sent from China, according to Chinese residents of Ho Chi Minh City who arrived here yesterday.

The 110 residents on Vietnam's largest southern city, formerly Saigon, flew here on a special charter from Vietnam for people who have Hong Kong relatives. They provided the first direct information, after a week of conflicting reports from Peking and Hanoi, about how Chinese in Vietnam have reacted to the sudden split between Peking and Hanoi.

One woman who identified herself only as Mrs. Chang said Ho Chi Minh City residents had learned from Chinese radio broadcasts of Peking's of-

fer to send ships for those ethnic Chinese who wished to leave.

"When they heard the news, they packed everything so they would be ready to go at any moment," she said. But she added that "most of the people think that Vietnam will not allow the Chinese ships to come because it would tarnish its image and lose its labor force."

Many of the immigrants arriving at Kai Tak Airport here declined to speak to reporters. They said the Vietnamese authorities had indicated that relatives remaining in Vietnam would suffer if they voiced any complaints. Others willingly told of longtime Chinese residents suffering food shortages along with many of their Vietnamese neighbors, but they were particularly hard-pressed because their traditional livelihood of small trading has been denounced as capitalism.

The immigrants indicated that the

Chinese in Vietnam were taking advantage of their ethnic heritage as they themselves had used their Hong Kong connections, to take any opportunity of escaping the hard new life of socialist Vietnam—just as many native Vietnamese have done in boats.

The immigrants said that expediency, rather than any deep desire to return to the motherland, explained why nearly 100,000 refugees have crossed the border into southern China.

"Most Chinese would prefer to go to Taiwan or Hong Kong or Southeast Asian countries" where the standard of living for overseas Chinese is higher, but the entrance requirements stricter than in China, said one passenger.

The official New China News Agency reported yesterday that 2,000 to 3,000 "victimized Chinese from Vietnam" were pouring into the Chinese border region on Kwangsi each day. The official Vietnam News Agency, however, reported yesterday that some Chinese were returning to Vietnam after discovering that refugees were being sent to work on commune farms.

The agency said one Chinese, Sung Xuan, 35, had returned to Vietnam with his wife and baby after spending four days sleeping on mats on the floor of a Chinese reception station and watching refugee belongings being "forcibly purchased at an arbitrary single price."

Yesterday's flight to Hong Kong, the 29th of its kind since South Vietnam fell to the communists in 1975, carried few people between the ages of 18 and 40. A Hong Kong official said the Vietnamese authorities had been "very cooperative and helpful," but the immigrants said healthy young Chinese adults, some of whom have

been drafted into the army, were not allowed to leave Vietnam. The immigrants said they were not allowed to take more than \$10 each in currency or gold out of the country.

"I haven't tasted meat in three months," said Mrs. Chang, 40, who said she had worked in a textile mill. She said the standard of living in Vietnam was declining, as each person was allowed no more than 20 pounds of wheat or rice each month and most of it was "very bad."

Several immigrants said Chinese were forced to volunteer for farm work in the "new economic zones" and forced to become Vietnamese citizens, something Peking has been particularly incensed about.

"The people are told Vietnam has three enemies: first America, second Cambodia and third, China," Mrs. Chang said. She said she saw some Russians in Ho Chi Minh City, but heard there were many more in the coastal city of Vungtau.

A pro-communist newspaper here, the Wen Wei Po, printed interviews with Chinese who had arrived from Vietnam before the Peking-Hanoi propaganda war began. One man said the goods of 20,000 Chinese traders in Cholon were confiscated. "Many people committed suicide," he said. "One family of four persons whose fabric shop had been confiscated locked themselves in their house and set fire to it to protest the persecution."

A Hong Kong official said about 40,000 Chinese living in Vietnam had applied to immigrate here in the last three years. Of those, 4,341 have been admitted, 10,000 are under consideration and 26,000 rejected for failing to have close enough family ties with Hong Kong residents. About 1,200 new applications are pouring in each month, the official said.